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ABSTRACT

Although there is a paucity of research-based information about the literacy of the aged, educators, researchers, and authors continue to propose certain practices and advocate certain positions, often while operating under unconscious or unexamined biases against the elderly. What research has been done indicates that literacy instruction that not only stresses the importance of social interaction, but also allows elders to participate in the actual program planning--which gives them control over the situations that affect their lives--has demonstrated that the "diminished view" elders often have of themselves can change dramatically. The little empirical data available also point to the fact that reading interests of the elderly vary just as they do in the general population, but few commercial publishers seem to be interested in developing reading materials for this group. Thus, the literature illustrates a need for further empirical research into the perceptions of reading and writing held by the elderly. Such research should not assume that elders are "old children" who need "back to basics" instruction, or that elders share the same needs, beliefs, and interests with a college-educated public. Rather, this research should investigate the elderly's concepts of the purpose of reading and writing, assess their reading needs as well as their reading interests, and examine the effect of societal expectations of the abilities of the elderly on their reading behaviors and interests. (HTH)

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Literacy and Elders:

What We Know and What We Need To Find Out

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Literacy and Elders:

What We Know and What We Need To Find Out

Too little is known about the literacy needs of elders. What little attention has been paid to these needs has been based on unexamined assumptions, assumptions both about elders and about literacy. For example, a common assumption is that elders must be "functionally literate"; that is, they must be able to read a variety of forms and instructions in order to function at all, to fill out a welfare application form, for example, or to read a doctor's list of recommended foods. The little research done on the literacy needs of the aged has used materials which do not reflect the real world (Taub, 1980). Programs of literacy training for elders are thus based upon inadequate and inaccurate information. Our purpose in this article is to review what we actually do know about literacy and the aged and to offer some suggestions for future investigation.

What We Know

Hunter and Harman (1979) contend in their recent and most authoritative report to date on adult illiteracy that there are between 18-22 million adult functional illiterates in the United States. The actual number of illiterate adults over 65 is unknown, however. Hunter and Harman report that approximately 3/4 of those over 65 have not completed grade school, but that statistical information about the actual number of aged illiterates "is even more elusive than data about the population as a whole." One author estimates that between 10-50% of all adults over 60 are functionally illiterate (Lumsden, 1979).

Until very recently, very few educators and researchers have paid any serious attention to the reading of the elderly. In fact, even today with the increasing awareness and concern for the problems of the aged, there is a paucity of research into the reading behavior and interests of the older adult (Kingston, 1973; Kingston, 1979; Robinson and Maring, 1976; De Santi, 1976, Gentile and McMillan, 1979). Indeed, as De Santi (1976) has observed, "Reading research has reflected the attitude of our society as a whole where the young are catered to and the old are at best, tolerated, and at worst, ignored."

Even a cursory look into the literature on reading will impress upon one the sad truth of De Santi's observation. One can find literally hundreds of articles dealing with the reading of children, teenagers, college students, and adults in Education Index and the ERIC Index. If one finds even a handful of articles or studies dealing with reading of the elderly, one will be truly lucky. Moreover, much of the data on the reading of the elderly has been gathered from surveys of the general population. These surveys typically look at such things as the use of library services; they do not look exclusively at the reading behavior and habits of the elderly. Thus, the reading behavior, habits, and preferences of the elderly continue to remain relatively unknown, and what information we do have is partial, fragmentary, and often contradictory (Gentile and McMillan, 1979). Even less is known about their writing habits and preferences.

Although there is a paucity of research-based information about the literacy of the aged, educators, researchers, and authors nevertheless continue to propose certain practices and advocate certain positions. For example, they suggest teaching techniques, recommend "appropriate" materials,

and develop reading programs on the basis of little more than their assumptions. These assumptions, moreover, are all too often based upon stereotypical notions of what the "typical" elderly readers needs and wants.

One recent research project which investigated the functional reading competencies of the elderly, for example, was based on the assumption that the elderly reader wants to be like, and indeed must be like, the average "functionally competent" adult who is able to fill out forms, complete applications, etc. Moreover, these researchers assume that it is necessary for functionally illiterate elderly adults to be "brought up" to the standards of functional competency established by Northcutt, et al. (1975) in their Adult Performance Level (APL) objectives. These researchers contend:

> It is no wonder that the elderly report they do not avail themselves of community resources because they find the informational literature and application forms complex and difficult to understand. . . The data do seem to suggest that greater emphasis be placed upon developing functional competence in the aged . . . (Allington and Walmsley, 1980).

This line of reasoning is not grounded in empirical research; the researchers simply assume that the aged want and need to read "informational literature and application forms." Moreover, a recent study using the original APL data has shown that the APL test and objectives do not measure functional competence. The APL competencies have been established on the basis of an unacknowledged value position; i.e., functional competence was viewed in terms of such questionable and culturally biased standards as level of education, annual income, etc. (Cervero, 1980).

Programs based upon the research cited above are usually developed by well-meaning people. Such programs, however, since they are based upon questionable research can, and do, have negative practical effects. Research and literacy programs based upon stereotypical assumptions of the elderly contribute to the distorted notion that the older adult is incompetent, inadequate, and in need of "fixing up" by some professionals. Illich and Verne (1976), discussing the aim of much "lifelong" education, contend:

> In fact, and from a historical point of view, one gets the general impression that the aim is to extend the institution of childhood into adulthood...Now professional educators, through the institution of permanent education, succeed in convincing men of their permanent incompetence. The ultimate success of the schooling environment is the extension of its monopoly, first to all youth, then to every age and, finally, to all areas.

Unfortunately, those educators and researchers who do in fact look at the reading of the elderly usually operate under such unconscious or unexamined biases. They assume that the elderly need the same kind of instruction typically found in the elementary school classroom. Thus, these educators and researchers develop instructional techniques and materials which are eerily similar to those "back to basics" programs being foisted upon children. These programs treat elders as "old children."

Fortunately, however, there is a small number of educators who disagree, often quite forcefully and eloquently, with those who advocate a "back to basics" type of instruction for the elderly. These educators do not operate from <u>a priori</u> assumptions about the elder reader. Instead, they are actually

out in the community working with elders; they are reading. writing, speaking, and listening to elders in nursing homes, retirement centers, senior citizen centers, and other institutions (Koch, 1977; Watson, et al., 1979; Wilson, 1979; Lovelace, 1979; Wolf, 1980). The information gained from such experiences, however, is still sparse and not synthesized. As Haase, et al. (1979) point out:

> It appears evident that what is needed is a model of the aged reader that is descriptive, positive, interactive, and representative. . . Exploration of appropriate reading materials and teaching strategies needs to be performed. Educational needs and interests of the elderly needs to be identified so that the reading programs offered are actually attended.

The "needs and interests of the elderly" are precisely the things that are not being considered by program planners, instructors, and material developers. Rather, literacy programs are developed for the elderly by those who think that they know what is best for the elderly. These program based upon "assumptive thinking" are, as Heisel (1980) points out, usually dismal failures:

> Could it be that for those who feel they are too old or too disabled for education, or who appear completely lacking in motivation, expressive learning would renew their interest in life? Perhaps many older adults show no interest in expressive education because it has often been presented as a means of keeping busy, the implications of which they may resent.

If programs based on "assumptive thinking" and stereotypical notions of what the elderly are like usually fail, upon what should such programs be based?

Indeed, should there be programs--in the traditional "classroom" sense of program--at all? Wilson discovered that elders do not want more of the same typical classroom instruction. She found in her reading program that the "few times the leader tried to create structure, participants balked and stated emphatically that they were not in school anymore" (Wilson, 1979). Watson, et al. (1979) and Lovelace (1979) found that elders want to be able to use reading and writing as means of engaging in social interactions with their peers. Wolf (1980) likewise contends that reading for the elders he interviewed was not related to functional competencies. Instead, they used it as a way to enjoy leisure time, to form social contacts, to cope with the problems of aging, and to satisfy curiosity. For these elders, reading "is a means to perpetuate an ongoing connection with life" (Wolf, 1980). Truly, as Dreher (1980) maintains, reading and writing provide the "mental stimulation and ego involvement that enhance retirement life."

Literacy instruction which not only stresses the importance of social interaction, but also allows elders to participate in the actual program planning--which gives them control over the situations that affect their lives--has demonstrated that the "diminished view" elders often have of themselves (Gentile and McMillan, 1979) can dramatically change. Koch's (1977) work with elders in a nursing home clearly shows what can occur when elders begin to think of themselves as readers and writers. Koch observes, "The people we taught weren't used to the kind of respectfully determined interest in their imaginings and perceptions that we had. It seems possible they weren't used to being listened to that much at all" (Koch, 1977). Once these elders discovered, however, that they were being listened to, they were able

to create poetry which (although not "high art") was not only meaningful to them, but meaningful to their peers as well.

The little empirical data available also point to the fact that elders are very selective when choosing reading materials (Haase, et al., 1979). The reading interests of the elderly vary a great deal, just as they do in the general population. There are, however, some indications (Watson, et al., 1979) that there are certain general themes and truths in stories which elders can relate to and discuss. These themes usually serve as "springboards" for discussion, reminiscences, etc. As Kingston (1979) observes, "Few commercial publishers seem to be interested in developing and marketing reading materials aimed solely for this group." They may not be interested, however, because they do not know about the needs and concerns of the elderly.

What We Need To Find Out

Thus, what the literature seems to illustrate quite clearly is a need for empirical research into the perceptions of reading and writing held by the elderly. Such research will not assume, at the one extreme, that elders are "old children" who need "back to basics" instruction or, at the other extreme, that elders share the same needs, beliefs, and interests with a college-educated public. Rather this research will look specifically at the elders themselves; it will investigate their conceptions of what reading and writing are good for. Such research will address two of the research needs emphasized by Robinson and Haase (1979) who maintain that research into the reading of the elderly should include:

> Assessment of reading needs of the elderly as well as assessment of their interests.

Effect of societal expectations of the abilities of the elderly on their reading behaviors and interests.

Until such empirical data is gathered, until the elders themselves tell educators what they want to do with reading and writing, programs will continue to impose upon them the distorted, stereotypical notions of them held by much of society. The crime of warehousing the elderly will continue to be compounded by the condescension of educators.

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